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SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/27/2018

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA EVENTS CREATE "TSUNAMI" IN INDIAN POLITICS

REF: A. CHENNAI 00344

[B.](#) CHENNAI 00326

Classified By: Acting Political Counselor Les Viguerie for reasons 1.4(B and D).

[¶](#)1. (C) Summary. The recent uptick in violence and the plight of Tamils in Sri Lanka has created a political firestorm in India, with a potential faceoff between the ruling Congress Party and its coalition DMK partners in Tamil Nadu. However, a political crisis appears to have been avoided, as the GOI has received assurances that the Tamils' humanitarian needs will be met by the GSL. One Sri Lanka expert in New Delhi believes the Indian government has offered tacit support for the GSL's actions by not demanding a ceasefire at this time. Should such a behind-the-scenes arrangement be true, the GOI will have played its cards extremely well, having simultaneously strengthened ties with the Rajapaksa government, assisted in weakening the LTTE, and repaired a fractured coalition in Tamil Nadu, all while maintaining the moral high ground on the Tamils' humanitarian situation. End Summary.

Political "Tsunami"

[¶](#)2. (C) Political machinations have been churning in Tamil Nadu (reftels) and New Delhi since the October 6 resolution passed by the Tamil Nadu assembly on the plight of Sri Lanka's Tamils. On that day, National Security Advisor MK Narayanan summoned the Sri Lankan Deputy High Commissioner in Delhi to demarche him on the need to revive the political process in Sri Lanka. This unleashed a chain of high-level statements on both sides. Following the Tamil Nadu "all party" meeting October 14 -- where Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi set a two-week deadline for the UPA led center to arrange a ceasefire in Sri Lanka, threatening that all Tamil Nadu MPs would resign if no ceasefire was reached -- other top GOI politicians have entered the fray. External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee called the situation a matter of grave concern and insisted on the rights of Tamils to be respected. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh expressed concern over the humanitarian situation in Sri Lanka to both the press and in a suo moto statement to parliament, calling for the security of civilians to be safeguarded and reiterating that a military solution is not possible. PM Singh also announced during the October 22 parliament statement that Sri Lankan Senior Advisor to the President Basil Rajapaksa would visit India to discuss the situation. The political posturing taking place in Tamil Nadu and Delhi caused Rediff to describe the situation as "a political tsunami waiting to

happen."

One Analyst's Take: Actually, A Convenient Set of Circumstances for GOI

¶3. (C) There are several factors causing the political turmoil in India over the Sri Lanka situation, however, the GOI stands to benefit from events, Major General (Ret.) Ashok Mehta, a Sri Lanka expert who often visits the island told PolOffs in an October 24 conversation. While the domestic politics of Tamil Nadu seem to drive India's response, the rhetoric is exacerbated in part by recent surveys indicating that support in Tamil Nadu for the LTTE and Elam is quite high right now, in contrast to conventional wisdom that such support dried up after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi. More importantly, the LTTE is losing badly on the battlefield, he explained, and is using the civilians caught in the crossfire as an excuse to ask for help from India to achieve a ceasefire based on a humanitarian crisis. Mehta speculated that the Sri Lankan military is positioned to soon capture Kilinochchi. It could take one week or several months, but after Kilinochchi falls, he thinks victory by the Army at Paranthan and Elephant Pass is inevitable, cutting off Pooneryn and Mullaitivu. When asked by Poloffs if this could signal the beginning of the end for the LTTE as a military force, Mehta quickly dismissed the possibility, saying that Kilinochchi and the others would simply be well timed symbolic gains, but that the LTTE was too entrenched in the east to believe that an overall military victory would ever occur.

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¶4. (C) Mehta guessed that once Kilinochchi falls -- but not before -- the Sri Lankan government will want to give its soldiers, many of whom have been deployed for over a year, a break, the timing of which could also work well politically. The GSL will declare a "humanitarian suspension of offensive military action" (i.e. a ceasefire by any other name) for three or four weeks. The Sri Lankan military will not object, as it will provide much needed time to regroup, and Rajapaksa can make a virtue out of that necessity by providing time for NGOs to go into the affected areas and provide relief for IDPs. This will also win political points for Sri Lanka with India and the international community.

¶5. (C) Mehta went on to say he believed President Rajapaksa would use his military gains for political purposes, capitalizing on the popularity he has gained through military victories by holding elections in the North and in five other provincial councils early next year. After he wins those elections, he will hold parliamentary elections hoping to win 120 seats and free himself from the support of the 15 plus smaller parties currently in his coalition government.

¶6. (C) The GOI's reaction to the Sri Lankan military's offensive and Tamil anger in India has been interesting more for what has been purposely left unsaid, according to Mehta, who pointed out that no government official has endorsed a call for a cease-fire. Going back to October 6, when the Tamil Nadu assembly passed its resolution, through the Prime Minister's October 22 suo moto statement, Tamil Nadu politicians have consistently called for a ceasefire, but the Foreign Minister and Prime minister have emphasized only three points in their communication with the GSL: 1) the plight of civilians and need for access to essential relief; 2) protest over the Sri Lankan Navy firing on Indian fishermen; and 3) the need to seek a political solution in Sri Lanka.

¶7. (C) As further evidence of Delhi's tacit support for Colombo, Mehta pointed out that, despite the internal backlash from media, intellectuals, and opposition parties in Sri Lanka, e.g., "Why is India interfering when we are winning?", FM Basil Rajapaksa has responded with public

statements that India has been supportive of the integrity of Sri Lanka and has not interfered with the fight against the LTTE or pressured the GSL. The GSL did not permit a debate over the situation in Tamil Nadu to take place in the Sri Lankan Parliament recently, Mehta noted, avoiding the possibility of nasty comments about the neighbor. The October 23 debate in the Indian parliament was really no debate at all, Mehta claimed. FM Mukherjee said to the Rajya Sabha that fighting the LTTE was part of India's security strategy and said military cooperation will continue as a strategic necessity. India's military assistance to Sri Lanka never targeted Tamils, he said, but only the terrorist LTTE. Mehta emphasized that this was the first time he had heard the GOI call the LTTE "terrorists," adding that Mukherjee was using "the GSL's language." Mehta assessed that what started as a diplomatic row has been transformed into a simple diplomatic exchange and all sides saved face, creating a sort of diplomatic high point.

¶8. (C) Mehta pointed out that President Rajapaksa did not miss the fact that Indian leaders never asked him for a ceasefire. The GSL knows, according to Mehta, it can not win against the LTTE without the GOI's tacit help, and so agreed to do everything in its power to satisfy the GOI's non-ceasefire demands, as evidenced by allowing two food convoys of 750 tonnes, under UN supervision, to move into affected areas since October 14th. In return for India's silence on a ceasefire, Mehta predicted, Basil Rajapaksa would, in his visit to India on October 26, announce his government would make a commitment to the humanitarian aspects of the crisis. Basil's statement should be crafted in a manner which should be able to satisfy Tamil Nadu (read: the DMK) that the central government had responded to its demands, and ultimately, then, have a face-saving method of avoiding mass resignation.

¶9. (C) While the GOI orchestrated none of this, Mehta felt it had played its cards extremely well, potentially ending up with a nice package of: strengthened relations with the GSL;

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a weakened LTTE; a position of moral high ground on the humanitarian plight of Tamils; and a coalition in Tamil Nadu if not strengthened, at least repaired.

Comment: Crisis Averted, As Expected

¶10. (C) Comment: While Mehta was offering his personal analysis, initial indications suggest his assessment of the Indian domestic dimension was accurate. (Note: Ref A also predicted the DMK would be able to maneuver out of its resignation threat. End Note.) On October 27, Indian press reported that FM Mukherjee, in an October 26 meeting, received assurances from Basil Rajapaksa that the Sri Lankan Army will "go out of its way" to make sure there are no civilian casualties in the ongoing war. Following that meeting, Mukherjee reportedly met with Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M Karunanidhi in Chennai. The Times of India reported the Mukherjee-Rajapaksa meeting "may have provided the safe exit passage for Karunanidhi," and headlines declared the Lanka row had "settled." The Economic Times quoted Karunanidhi as saying after the meeting "I will not create any problems for the Centre," with the daily saying the DMK resignation threat had "blown over."

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